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Burlington County Times
July 14th, 2009

John Adler visits Fort Dix to discuss wages and base merger.

FORT DIX - Military pay and the merger of Fort Dix, McGuire Air Force Base and Lakehurst Naval Engineering Station dominated the discussion at a post town hall meeting with Congressman John Adler.

Adler, D-3rd of Cherry Hill, spoke to a group of about 75 soldiers and civilians during Monday's one-hour meeting, dubbed "Congress on Your Base."

"It's a privilege to talk to any American, but it's a particular privilege to talk to those who work to keep the Adler family and those around us free and safe," he said.

The meeting featured mostly questions posed to the congressman about several issues, notably the disparity in pay between civilians working at Fort Dix and McGuire Air Force Base and their counterparts at Lakehurst.

The three installations are slated to merge into the nation's first joint base Oct. 1, yet civilians working at Lakehurst, in the New York pay area, earn substantially more than those at Fort Dix and McGuire, part of the Philadelphia pay area.

Adler has introduced legislation to bring the salaries of Fort Dix and McGuire personnel up to those at Lakehurst, and he has spoken with the White House chief of staff about the issue.

"We believe people should be paid the same throughout the joint base. The White House knows

this is a big deal for us. We're very confident we can get this done by Oct. 1," Adler said.

Adler said he is trying to address the elimination of the "offset" in retirement pay for veterans who draw both retirement and disability compensation. Legislation to allow veterans to receive the full amount for both has languished in congressional committees, Adler said.

"We're working to change the law," he said. "It's a little thing to our federal budget but will do a lot to help. I understand it's a frustrating issue."

Other questions and statements from the assembled soldiers, civilians and veterans involved the backlog of Veterans Administration cases and efforts to find employment for young veterans returning from duty overseas.

One civilian worker asked Adler to explain his vote in support of an energy bill that installs a cap-and-trade mechanism for fossil fuel emissions. The worker asked if it was true the bill would raise her family's utility costs.

Adler said New Jersey already has a cap-and-trade system in place so the national policy would result in decreased utility bills for New Jersey residents. He said states such as Kentucky, which rely largely on coal for power, likely would face increased costs.

"For me it was an easy vote," Adler said, adding the bill would aid national security by reducing dependence on foreign oil.

Adler announced the inclusion of \$7.9 million in a Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Act to pay for the construction of a family support center on the merged Joint Base Dix/McGuire/Lakehurst. He said the building would provide a modern, properly sited center to support increased demand for services for military families living on the joint base.

"We must support the brave men and women in uniform who keep us safe," Adler said about

the earmark. "Our service members and their families make sacrifices for our freedom every day. I'm proud to do my part to support their efforts."